The Asset Strippers is a major new work by Mike Nelson, created for the annual Tate Britain Commission. This commission invites artists to create a new artwork in response to the grand space of the Duveen Galleries in Tate Britain, London.

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The text I've written below is intended to act as a framework through which the reader can better understand my intentions and the context in which the work was made. The text is not an overtly theoretical one, but one that attempts to convey a level of understanding necessary to read the "prose" of the physical exhibition, represented in this issue of *Diacritics* by the images interspersed throughout the publication. As an artist I am more accustomed to making my point through material and space than purely with the written word and hope that some element of this can be retained in this short text and photographic record.

The vision I had was of the Duveen Galleries littered with the remnants of a past world, the space returned to what it had once been—a series of halls for the display of monumental sculpture. I was drawn to the idea of concentrating on the postwar era of my parents and of my childhood, of Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century. My initial thoughts focused on the huge knitting machines worked on by my father as a mechanic early on in his working life. Along with my grandfather, and initially my mother, they all worked in the textile factories in the English East Midlands, witnessing the industry's last surge of the 1950s and '60s until its sometimes brutal demise throughout the 1970s and '80s. Elements of this epoch's decline along with aspects of its socially progressive vision formed the core of my frame of reference as it was a world into which I was born and one that I somehow expected to continue in a linear trajectory. However, the vision of postwar Britain, its welfare state, and its attempts at social equality seem long gone. What I see now and into the near future, particularly in the arts, is a new Victorian era of wealthy patronage in the wake of state decline, spawning vanity and inequality. The idea of the Duveens becoming a warehouse to house idiosyncratic monuments to a historically brief and visionary moment in time somehow seemed strangely apt given Britain's current chaos in the face of introversion and self-reflection.

The Duveens extension was funded by Sir Joseph Duveen, who had made his fortune selling art to industrialists. It was opened in 1937 by King George VI in the same year as his coronation; he would become known as the king who ultimately oversaw the dismantling of the majority of the British Empire. These were Britain's first designated spaces for sculpture, places where people could come and wonder at the sheer physicality of sculptural objects. In this sense I imagined the work in much the same way as the cast room at the Victoria and Albert Museum or the lower galleries of the British Museum, nineteenth-century exhibition spaces that the Tate would have looked at, aiming to both rival and emulate their eclectic,

ethnographic collections laid out in such a way as to allow the visitor to navigate and decipher in an exploratory manner. I wanted to explore the shift of scale that is found in such places—spaces full of artefacts—to create a scene similar to that of an archeological site, between a sculpture court and a grand warehouse of architectural and industrial salvage.

Underpinning this, I was interested in how Britain and its empire historically came to be in such a position of power—that it was bound up with industrial prowess, particularly throughout the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. I wanted to investigate how an exhibition space used for the display of sculpture could be linked to the imperial and political status of Britain through the very materiality of the sculpture that it displays. The collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum or the British Museum talk of particular epochs of history, but what would monumental sculpture be made from now? These artefacts depicted here are not from the extensive British Empire or from British foreign interests or colonial excursions, but they are from the last remaining vestiges of what made these grand museums possible: industry. What I have accumulated here are the ends of an era, the cannibalising of all we have left—a sort of self-consumption, an eating away of ourselves. The names and locations of their production are clearly apparent in their casting or described on steel plates affixed to the machinery: Wadkin—Leicester, Ward—Birmingham, Edward G. Herbert—Manchester, Gardner—Hulme, Sciaky—Slough, Avery—Smethwick, J. A. Cox—Hull are among those decipherable. Others had come from the Scottish borders or from the farms of North West England and across into Wales. In this way a map of sorts was created of Britain in relation to its recent past.

The title—*The Asset Strippers*—has a direct relationship to the process I have gone through to make the work, and I was worried that this process could have gone unnoticed if it were not suggested somehow. In focusing on the manufacturing industry, it seemed particularly pertinent that I should access the industrial material through the era that has superseded it—that of digital technology. That is why I used the online auctions of asset strippers and company liquidators to amass the objects. It also provided a fatalistic structure through which to select the works:the auctions in the months preceding the exhibition opening acted like an ocean laying out historic debris to be deciphered like tidal detritus on a beach. However, the title also suggests a narrative potential like a Harold Pinter play—*The Caretaker* or *The Birthday Party*, for example—a “kitchen sink drama” or piece of social realism tinged with the absurd.

To some degree the work marks this shift from a manufacturing to a service industry, but I also focused on agriculture and infrastructure as well—haulage or the telephone system, for example. Other material has been stripped out of demolished sites; the timber came from a former historic army barracks dating from1870 in

Shrewsbury, while the graffitied steel sheeting stacked upon a workbench in the final room was used to cover the windows and secure a housing estate destined for “redevelopment” in South London, some of the doors are from the now demolished Royal Orthopaedic Hospital in London. So the National Health Service, public housing, and the Ministry of Defence were also present in a material way, conjuring the memory of the decline of the welfare state that has been accelerating since the 1980s.

Over the past years my work has shifted its focus from large architectural constructions that immerse the viewer in an alternate reality that all but renders the buildings they are in invisible, to a more sculptural emphasis. Earlier works such as *The Coral Reef* (2000) or *The Deliverance and the Patience* (2001) deployed a literal sculptural “trap” construction to both envelop the viewer and to force them to look—even if it were just for the way out. In doing so these works also attempted to elude consumption by both commerce and media. The white cube of the gallery, or selling hall, was obliterated and the “object” rendered non-visible, or at least purportedly so, allowing the work to be absorbed by a combination of the senses encouraging an understanding through the emotive and unconscious, a strategy that could perhaps deny the pervasive hunger of the advertising world. However, it was at the opening week of *I, Impostor* within the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011 that I realised that I had not only been co-opted by the rules of capital, but I had indeed become part of the media or advertising for it, like a huge trade stand in a market place but without the financial rewards: a lose-lose situation. Other recent developments within theatre, art, and the wider world in general had joined to render this approach problematic to me, so my focus returned to more object-based environments. The most defining of those works was *408 tons of imperfect geometry*, made shortly after Venice for the Malmö Konsthall in 2012. Here I wanted to reject the complicated substructures employed in many of my earlier works, those of narrative and meta-narrative that drew on both personal, historical, as well as fictive references for something that was more tangible and visceral. In Malmö the title pretty much described the form of the work; the load bearing of the floor represented by a huge geometric pattern, roughly cast in 3,500 concrete sections, referenced from Islamic design that spread across the floor. It was a thing in itself whose weight and existence were at the very essence of how it could be understood and I as the artist became the servant to it. Furthermore a huge vitrine was constructed to allow viewers to see the studio workings inside, rendering transparent the process and labour amongst the littered detritus of the cast.

Looking further back, an earlier work—*Lionheart* (1997)—had a strong relationship to *The Asset Strippers* in that it was made at a particularly pivotal moment in British history: the end of Conservative Party rule and the birth of New Labour, coinciding with the death of Princess Diana and a crisis of monarchy in the face of an ever-

expanding Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. *Lionheart* was named after the first imperialist king of England, Richard I—the first ruler to truly focus on foreign exploits whilst neglecting his subjects at home. The work was originally made for the Galerie im Künstlerhaus Bremen, in north Germany, and was constructed from material painstakingly collected and assembled from the streets, markets, and car boot sales of London, Bremen, and Helgoland to create a camp for a fictional drifter, an erstwhile hunter of the inanimate. In Bremen I saw that the markets were run almost exclusively by those from the former Eastern Bloc. Old medals and Soviet militaria, strange animal skins, and archaic technology proliferated in the cultural detritus from the backs of over-filled vans. It felt like the old Eastern trade routes and their markets which had been dormant were being reopened after the fall of Communism, some of which were heading towards Britain, a country on the cusp of change. At the time, the British markets were populated by an emergent underclass mixing with the recent immigrants from a colonial past, picking through the remnants of their own histories. This was a crossroads of sorts between the empire of the past and an ever-expanding Europe. Like *Lionheart*, *The Asset Strippers* is very much about Britain at a certain point in time. It wasn't a work that was made purely to reflect upon the political situation, but more so the histories that underpinned it; however given that the show opened ten days before Britain was meant to leave the EU for the first time, its relationship cannot be ignored.

What I made for the Duveen Galleries in many ways addresses and revisits these aspects of my own history and deals with material very much as sculpture—the symbiotic relationship of machine to sculpture and back again seems very evident when you view these objects together or in close proximity. It brings to mind a lineage of sculpture through the twentieth century that was both made possible by machinery and whose influence was two-way: industry facilitating art, art feeding industry. I'm interested in the way objects can be what they purport to be but also shift back into the very matter they are made from, redolent of all the associations of their provenance. Somewhere in between these two states they can also start to resemble things outside of themselves; at this fleeting moment something can occupy a status that's hard to categorise, art perhaps. The context of Tate Britain and the works of art in the surrounding galleries of course reinforce these "apparitions." The reference to *Gilette* (or *The Unknown Masterpiece*) by Honoré de Balzac in the title of the work *More things (To the memory of Honoré de Balzac)* (2012) at Matt's Gallery, London, is an apt reference: the story describes the possible birth of abstraction in the century before it actually emerged, and somehow the reference to Balzac also conjured the image of a Rodin sculpture, his lumpen portrait of the author—an object in itself that I think heralded a similar shift in Western sculpture. In the same associative way, many of the objects within *The Asset Strippers* took on the guise of other artists and their artworks, sometimes only occupying them momentarily or from one angle before evaporating back into the

machines or devices that they once were. Walking through the exhibition, the objects conjured not only twentieth-century British sculpture of Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein and Anthony Caro to Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg, but also surrealism from Max Ernst to Paul Nash. The ghosts of Arte Povera and the Brazilian scene of the late 1960s seemed never far away as did the happenings of Allan Kaprow or Gordon Matta-Clark and the memory of Land Art, both British and American. However, ultimately my work has always focused on humanity and I think this is what has drawn me to these objects, as most bear the traces of those who used them, and in that way they are both anthropomorphic but also descriptive of the absent people who worked them. Laid out on purpose-made slabs, the sculptures allude to the monumental, sombre, and commemorative akin to those of grand cemeteries or the parks and squares of world cities.

Ancient artefacts and sculpture often draw the question, “Who were the people that made or used these objects?” Such situations evoke an imagining of these absent people, small clues in the making leading us to construct a fictive documentary in the mind. Showing these assemblages of objects has led to a similar effect, and yet these are from within living memory—the speed of technology having laid waste to our collective familiarity in a timescale inconceivable even twenty years ago. This work is a public invocation of our families: grandparents, parents, and all their and our siblings.

– Mike Nelson